Top: Rows of chillies and peppers at the Union Square Greenmarket in New York City.

Above: A fruit and vegetable stall in the Central Market in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Farmers' Markets Are Growing in the United States

Text and photographs by SEBASTIAN JOHN

In the age of environmental consciousness and organic food, farmers' markets spell big business in America.

Two years ago, every bite of food that Darrell Meyer ate traveled an average of 2,100 kilometers from where it was grown to his dinner plate. He bought lots of packaged, processed food at big supermarkets and fast food restaurants. Eating that kind of food led him to be diagnosed with high cholesterol, high blood pressure and diabetes.

Now 57 and a retired federal employee, he eats more fruits and vegetables and they all come from within 320 kilometers of where he lives in Alexandria, Virginia, just outside Washington, D.C. How does he get it? From a farmers' market, where small, local farms sell fruits, vegetables, cheese, meat, flowers and loads of other products in small, temporary booths, usually once a week. Though some farmers hire people to sell their goods, most truck it in directly from the soil and sell it themselves.

Meyer and his wife, Sharada, spend about $60 a week shopping at local farmers' markets in Virginia, hand-picking fresh tomatoes, potatoes, green leaves and meat and talking to the farmers about the quality of the crop. With his new diet and exercise program, Meyer says, "My blood pressure is totally down. My doctors are amazed."

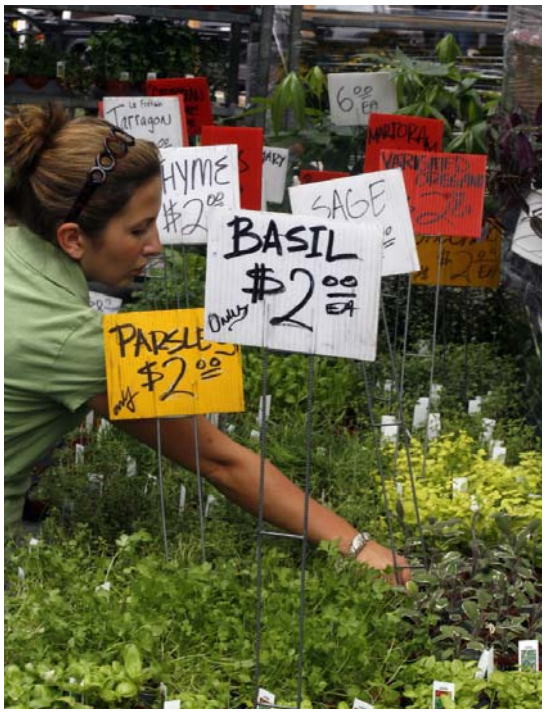
CAMERON KEYS

According to a study started in 1994 by Tufts University in Massachusetts, the average American sources his or her diet from that same long distance—2,100 kilometers away. It's not the mileage itself, say environmentalists and some health experts. It's that the farther the food travels, the less fresh it is and the more fuel is used to transport it. But many people like the Meyers are changing their ways, going to local farmers' markets to handpick fresher produce. The U.S. Department of Agriculture says that as of 2006 there were 4,385 organized farmers' markets in the country, up from to 2,410 a decade earlier.

In New York City, farmers' markets are big business. Big-name restaurants, chefs and Hollywood celebrities shop for food grown within a 290-kilometer radius of the metropolis. Mot Filipowski, senior market manager at Greenmarket in Union Square remembers all the stars he has seen: Anthony Bourdain of the Travel Channel, movie producer Peter Hoffman and actress Uma Thurman. "The list goes on and on," he says.

Filipowski says that people come for a variety of reasons: some want to support local farmers, some want organic food, and some long for types of vegetables they can't find anywhere else. Still others come to chat with the sellers and meet friends, a social benefit they can't get at a supermarket.

A woman buys fresh herbs at the Union Square Greenmarket in New York City.



Neil M. Zimmerman is a research physicist at the National Institute of Standards and Technology who volunteers some weekends at Adams Morgan Farmers' Market in Washington, D.C. to socialize and help provide healthy food for low-income people.

He believes that farming with fewer pesticides does less damage to the earth, but he also loves the taste. Pointing to a basket of strange, lumpy looking tomatoes made from old seed breeds, he says, "Those really ugly heirloom tomatoes, those taste like tomatoes. Tomatoes in a supermarket don't have any taste because they're picked before they're ripe and they've been bred to travel well. ...They're bred for looks so they still look good on the shelves."

But are farmers' markets and smaller farms sustainable in today's global marketplace? "Their popularity with consumers is growing, and buyers enjoy fresh, locally grown products," says Lloyd Day, a marketing expert for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. A 2006 department survey showed that 25 percent of the vendors interviewed said they relied on farmers' markets as their sole source of farm-based income. Average sales at individual farmers' markets in 2005 totaled about $245,000; average annual sales per vendor totaled $7,108.

Michael Tabor, a former U.S. government employee, has been selling fruits and vegetables at Adams Morgan Farmers' Market in Washington, D.C. since 1974. He says the popularity of farmers' markets has really grown in the last two years, as just a couple of years ago he was worried that he would have to close down.

Tabor got interested in farming after volunteering on a farm in Israel after leaving his government job. "I never knew I had an inclination towards farming," he says. He bought his farm as an investment property in 1971, but ended up farming full-time.

Tabor says that he does not really make a lot of money at what he does; he also sells to local cooperative markets and a college.

However, Tabor keeps his prices down on purpose. At many farmers' markets, the food can be more expensive than at supermarkets. For example, at the nearby DuPont Circle farmers' market, tomatoes are generally more than $2 per kilogram. He seeks to provide healthy, affordable food for the poorer people in the neighborhood who rely on the Women, Infants and Children program for Farmers' Markets. It's a government subsidized program that helps low-income people with free vouchers for food they buy at the markets. Revenues from the program provide an average of $17,696 a year at those markets that accept the vouchers.

Top: Farmer Lana Edelman sets out her strawberries at the City of Falls Church Farmers' Market in Virginia.
Above: A farm in Ronks, Pennsylvania.

A success story is illustrated by Lana Edelman's fruit and vegetable business, which has been operating at farmers' markets in Virginia and Maryland since 1972. She says she makes $500 to $1,000 at each of the seven markets her family visits each week. Edelman's husband and two of her four sons are involved in the business. Some farmers hire staff and rely on volunteers to work on the farm and sell at booths.

Edelman's sales have increased by about 50 percent in the last few years, since she started catering to ethnic populations that want special kinds of produce. Her farm focuses on African products like special hot chillies, but she also

Left: A farmer roasts peppers at the Portland Farmers' Market in Oregon.

Center left: An Amish farmer's stall in the Central Market in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Bottom left: Jillian Kohr inside her produce booth at Lauxmont Farm in York, Pennsylvania.

grows three types of eggplant: French, African and Thai.

So how different is the American farmers' market from the traditional Indian *bhajiwalla*? Smita Nordwall, a former journalist who grew up in India, and now runs her own business selling jams and jellies at farmers' markets, thinks that the core idea of freshness is not that different. "In both cases there is no involvement of cold storage and long transport," she says. "The difference is that the *bhajiwallas* are technically the middle men, while here many farmers take the opportunity to sell directly."

However, she points out that in the United States, farmers have their own trucks and can bring the produce into town, and the city also provides them a place to sell it, usually for a small fee. But in India, with weak road infrastructure, it takes people much longer to travel the distances from farm to town.

No matter where the produce is sold, Nordwall says, "The question is: are you doing fair trade with the farmer? ...You pay a premium price for your meat or wine. Why can't you pay (a fair price) for your vegetables when that is what you are going to be eating the most?"

Nordwall's jams do cost more than those in the supermarkets, but they also come in unique flavors like a combination of blueberry, orange and vanilla or a spicy, sweet jelly made of peppers.

Wayne Miller, who manages a farm and sells mostly chillies in Union Square Greenmarket in New York City, says that although he does make a living, farming is "one of the hardest things out there to make a dime with." Finding a niche, like chillies, is important.

Though newly popular, farmers' markets are certainly not new. Just ask any of the Amish farmers who live in rural southern Pennsylvania. Drive down any road around Lancaster County and you'll see

A customer checks tomatoes at the DuPont Freshfarm Market in Washington, D.C.

Organized Retail Helps Farmers and Consumers

One sector that can make a positive impact on many of India's poor—especially in rural areas—is organized retail. Leading Indian companies, including Reliance, Bharti and ITC, plan to invest billions of dollars in stores and infrastructure to get fresh produce directly from the farm to the market at markedly more competitive prices.

This level and diversity of investment is far beyond the means of government alone to provide and, if forthcoming, will bring about significant improvements in both job opportunities and quality of life in rural areas.

One study has found that Indian farmers presently receive only 35-40 percent of the retail price of their goods, compared to 65 percent in countries with highly organized retail. Higher price realizations have the potential to double farm income in India. We are beginning to see across the country that farmers welcome organized retailers and the higher prices they offer.

Ultimately, organized retail has the potential—through increased competition and the efficient allocation of rising investment flows—to increase economic gains to both farmers and consumers and to provide jobs to rural workers.

–U.S. Ambassador David C. Mulford, New Delhi, September 18, 2007

stout, white farmhouses advertising "apples, corn, peaches" and little girls selling onions and baked fruit pies in their front yards.

The Amish are members of a very traditional Christian sect who wear 18th-century style clothing, live mainly off farming and shun modern conveniences such as cars and televisions. The Lancaster Central Market, housed in a vast, brick building in the center of town, has been functioning since the 1730s. Inside you'll find spices, meats, homemade soups, baked goods, even art. Tourists drive in from the cities just to get the special products.

In the United States, known for its large-scale, corporate-oriented farming, it's clear that there is room for other choices. Small-scale crops and family farms are making a comeback.

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